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ABSTRACT

This brief digest of the results of the National Assessment of Writing compares the writing abilities of a sample of 17 year olds, in school and out, with an adult sample aged 26 to 35. In writing for social communication, 57% of the adults and 75% of the 17 year olds wrote descriptions that were judged acceptable. When asked to describe an auto accident, 38% of the adults wrote an acceptable account and 52% were unacceptable; 53% of the 17 year olds' accounts were acceptable and 46% unacceptable. On 3 exercises assessing ability to write in a business situation, adults scored an average of 50.5% acceptable responses, while the 17 year olds scored an average of 61.2% acceptable. 44% of the adults were not able to fill out a standard application form acceptably. (RS)

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WRITING ABILITIES OF AMERICAN YOUNG ADULTS

Large numbers of American adults cannot write well enough to fill out application forms adequately or to do other simple writing tasks encountered in daily life.

In a test of ability to convey information in written form, young people scored better than adults on nearly every test item. 61% of 17 year olds, as opposed to only 50% of adults, were able to fill out a standard application form adequately. Only 38% of adults could describe a traffic accident on the insurance company form; 53% of youngsters could do this task successfully. On a test of composition ability, 29% of the adults declined to write.

These results are a sharp reminder that functional literacy requires skills of writing and verbal expression as well as reading ability. Moreover, these skills must be secure enough for free and creative use.

The National Assessment of Writing tested a representative sample of Americans in four age groups on their ability to convey information in written form. The in-school population was tested at ages 9 and 13; a sample of 17 year olds both in and out of school was chosen; and adults ages 26 to 35 were also sampled. This brief digest will concentrate upon the results of the tests for adults, using the 17 year old population as a point of comparison. Two tests—filling out an application form and describing an auto accident—will be reported in more detail. We will follow the example of the National Assessment by leaving interpretation of the meaning of these facts to you who are concerned with programs of reading and basic education for adults.

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NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a large scale, carefully planned effort to assess knowledge, skills and attitudes in ten subject areas at four age levels. Reports of these recurring surveys include several, especially on citizenship, of interest in adult basic education. Moreover, the procedures of the assessment are themselves interesting, for these measurements are based on educational objectives worked out in cooperation with educators, subject specialists and citizens concerned with educational planning. See the list of published reports at the end of this digest. The NAEP was established by the Carnegie Corporation as a project of the Education Commission of the States. The writing assessment exercises were developed by the Educational Testing Service of Princeton, New Jersey.

FOUR WRITING GOALS

The writing skills defined for measurement related to four goals.

I. Write to Communicate Adequately in a Social Situation

II. Write to Communicate Adequately in a Business or Vocational Situation.

III. Write to Communicate Adequately in a Scholastic Situation.

IV. Appreciate the Value of Writing.

Each of these objectives was elaborated in more specific terms. For example, under the major objective, writing in a social situation:

> . . . communicates information and observes established social customs, usually under relatively informal conditions. For this reason, social writing normally does not stress strict mechanical correctness. . . . Of course, correctness is hoped for here as in any endeavor and "better" performance anticipated as the population matures, but social communication relies principally on factual accuracy, organization, and flavor.

Examples of types of behaviors expected at each of the four age levels were spelled out. For example, under Objective I, 9-year-olds were expected to be able to write invitations, such as inviting parents to a PTA meeting; to write thank-you notes; and to record telephone messages for someone not at home. Thirteen year olds should have been able to do these things, and to write personal letters. Seventeen year olds should also have been able to write directions; adults were expected to be able to do these things and to write formal notes and talks for a community group.

WRITING FOR SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

From the representative national sample of more than 8,000 adults, the following evidence of writing ability was obtained. Results for the sample of 17 year olds are included for comparison. Several of the tasks were identical for the two age groups, providing direct comparisons. Adults were not tested in the area of Writing in a

Scholastic Situation. Each major objective included several exercises, some of which have not been released since they will be used again in future comparative surveys. Here are the results for Writing for Social Communication.

Describing Actions

Respondents were asked to write a description of how to make or do something (e.g., baking bread, changing a tire, painting a house, or whatever the respondent elected to describe) completely, simply and clearly enough that a person unfamiliar with the task could follow the directions. Scoring was based on completeness and whether enough information was given to enable the reader to perform the task described.

57% of adults and 75% of the 17 year olds wrote descriptions that were judged acceptable. 25% of the adults and 22% of the 17 year olds responses were unacceptable. 18% of the adults and 4% of the 17 year olds gave no response.

This first exercise establishes two persistent patterns: in general, the 17 year olds perform better than the adults on writing tasks; throughout the exercises many more adults than youngsters simply do not attempt to do the writing tasks NRC readers conclude.

Reporting Auto Accident

Asked to describe an automobile accident on a diagram, 38% of the adults wrote an acceptable account, 52% were unacceptable and 10% did not attempt the task. The comparable figures for the 17 year olds are 53% acceptable, 46% not acceptable and 1% no response.

Here, as a sample of National Assessment procedures, is the way this auto accident writing task was presented and scored.

Here is a diagram of an automobile accident. Study the diagram for a while and then in the space below describe the accident in your own words.

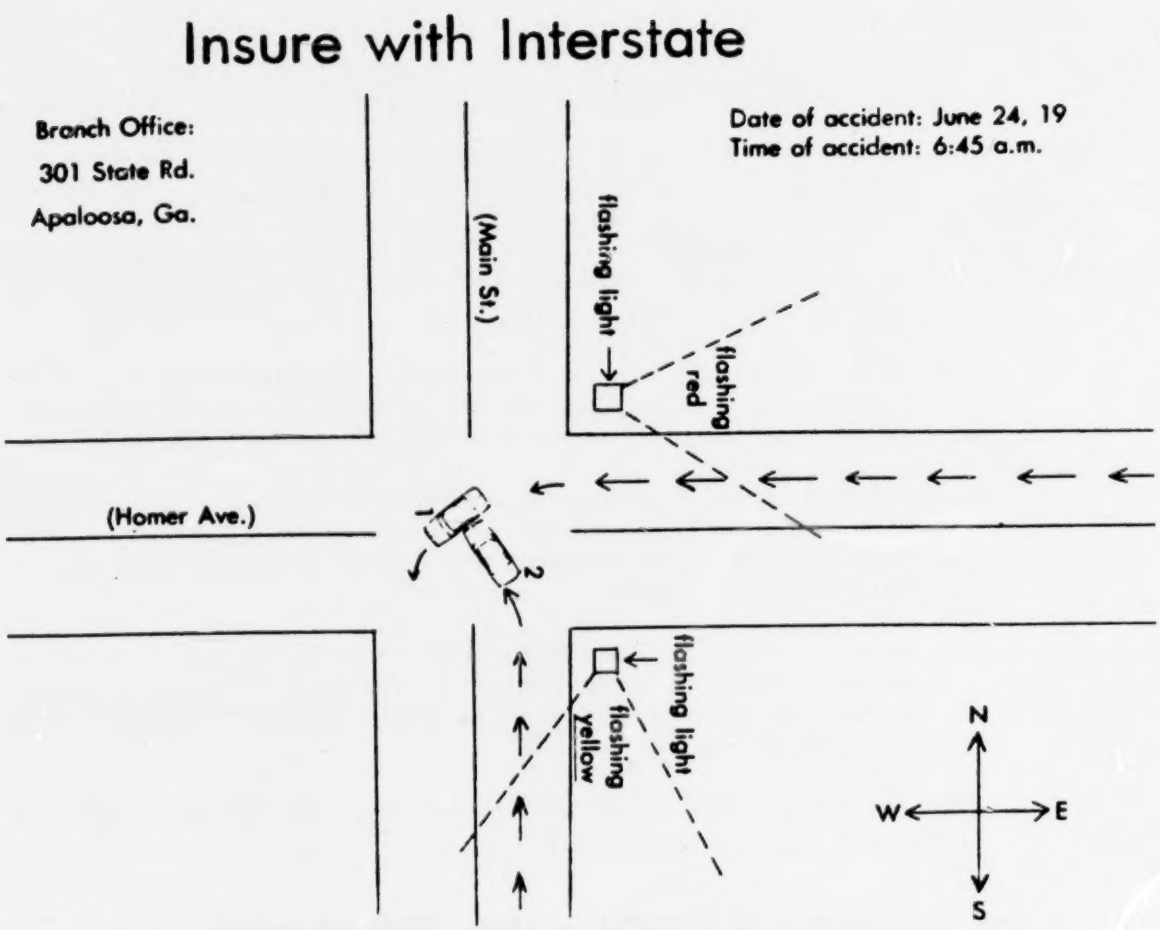
(Approximately 1-1/2 pages of lined space were provided for the response.)

SCORING

Acceptable: The description must mention four of the following:

1) **name of the street for each car**
2) **direction each car was traveling**
3) **which traffic light each one had**
4) **the fact that each was turning**
5) **the fact that a collision occurred.**

Not acceptable: If the description contained a mistake, for instance, that car #1 had a yellow light or that car #2 was turning right, it was automatically counted unacceptable, no matter how good the rest of the description was.



Letter Writing

The final writing task related to communicating in social situations required the respondent to read a news item about a State Highway Department's plans for a new expressway interchange, "to assume that you are a resident with definite feelings," and to write a letter "telling how you feel about the planned interchange and why you feel that way."

Trained readers, using a scale of 0 to 8, rated the quality of the letters relative to other letters in the exercise. There was no attempt to rate them on an external criterion of excellence. The following actual samples enable us to judge for ourselves how effectively these letters at various levels might be in communicating the thoughts and feelings of the writers.

Below are examples of the better papers written by adults; 13% wrote papers at least as good as these:

Dear Sir,

I, too, am opposed to the proposed interchange along with Committeeman Swift. I see no reason why we should be subjected to unnecessary traffic congestion that this interchange would produce. Also, the tourist flow would be increased to the point where we would be tending our lives to gain their business. I'm afraid that the change our mayor speaks of would be one for the worse instead of the better.

Unless you can show me some proof that this would not take place I'm afraid this is the way I stand on the issue.

Yours truly

Dear Sir,

I am in full agreement with you on the matter of the new expressway. From the material I have read on the subject it will allow more people to see our valley and help our business. It does not seem it would harm the town's historical appearance for it would be on the outskirts of town.

We need more people and young people in this town for the future and making it easy to get to and making it easy for them to get to other places is one good way of promoting this. I say yes sincerely.

Dear Commissioner Stroud,

I, as a concerned citizen of Windsorville, am writing this letter to you in regards to the proposed interchange being planned for our community.

Contrary to the opinion of our mayor, Clarke Kronbeck, I strongly oppose the construction of the proposed interchange in our community. Windsorville has prided itself in maintaining its rural attributes which include a small community where everyone is friendly, a fortunate lack of prejudice and a strong community sense of togetherness.

The introduction of such a proposed traffic set-up will definitely destroy our beloved rurality. If be desired to live near a city with great traffic problems we would not have chosen this community.

Also, taxes will not be lowered! Who will be asked to help with the upkeep of this interchange — we will!

Let's give our village a chance to remain small and quiet. Preserve the historical aspects of our community.

Very sincerely yours,

a concerned
Windsorville
citizen

My family & I have lived in Windsorville for 17 years. During that time we have vacationed in progressive towns & cities. We have always been happy to return to Windsorville as it is. If we felt otherwise, we would move to a more or perhaps even less progressive town.

Please accept this as the word of 2 town people who are in favor of leaving Windsorville "off the map".

Here are examples of typical papers written by adults; 53% wrote papers at least as good as these.

Dear Sir

In regards to the new expressway I feel that it would be a asset to our town.

In regard to your statement that the toll rate would be lower. I feel that you are wrong..

Sincerely

I do not want the new interchange at Windsorville much "progress". A need has not been established for the new interchange. Until a valid need is evidenced, the interchange should not be approved.

John Doe
Box 10
Windsorville

State Highway Department
Commissioner Street

Dear Sir

I am very much in favor of an additional interchange, as the present one is to congested with traffic.

It would also help business and give the state jobs and activity on the unemployment.

thank you

The recent report, *Writing: National Results–Mechanics* provides some commentary on the high rejection rate among the adults for this exercise–29%, reflecting, perhaps, insecurity in writing skill, dislike of a school type task, or indifference to the content. Since the material was presented in oral as well as written form, reading problems are not the cause of this rejection rate. Data are presented regarding errors in spelling, sentence structure, use of capitals and other aspects of grammar and punctuation. Some highlights:

- Most of the adult letters were relatively free of fragmentary sentences, though the sentences varied greatly in complexity.
- About three-fourths of both high and low quality papers were free of capitalization errors.
- Thirty-nine percent of the papers, both high and low quality, were free of spelling and word choice errors.
- High quality papers presented considerable variety and sophistication in vocabulary compared with their limited freedom in sentence structure, punctuation, etc. Paragraphing was usually simple and brief. A speculative explanation is that these young adults have been influenced by the terse, impactful style of current news journalism.

WRITTEN COMMUNICATION IN A BUSINESS SITUATION

On three exercises assessing ability to write effectively in a business or vocational situation, adults scored an average of 50.5% acceptable responses, while 17 year olds scored an average of 61.2% acceptable. On the two tasks which were identical, the youths scored significantly better than the adults.

Letters

Asked to invite the mayor or some other leader in the community to speak to a club, business association, or church group, 51% of the adults wrote a letter which included all necessary information, while 28% gave no response.

Adults were asked to order a pair of sea horses from a given address; 49% of them did so, 30% gave a response which did not include all the necessary information, and 20% gave no response.

Application Form

The third exercise required filling out a standard application form which 50% did acceptably, 44% not acceptably and 5% did not attempt the task.
Here is how the exercise was presented. Compared to many forms we all fill out, this is a simple one. 44% of the adults did not do an acceptable job with it.

Below is a sample application blank. Ones like it are used to get information from people who are applying for driving licenses, credit cards, passports, and other identification cards. Please print the information requested.

Do not use your own name. For this application blank, each man should call himself Adam Baker Carson. Each woman should call herself Alice Baker Carson. You may make up the rest of the information.

1. _____
last name first middle initial

2. _____
street address

3. _____
city or town county state zip code

4. DATE OF BIRTH: _____ 5. SEX: _____
month day year M or F

6. HT: _____ WT: _____ HAIR: _____ EYES: _____

TODAY'S DATE: _____

SCORING

Acceptable: Every blank completed with appropriate information, and the first three lines printed. Acceptable responses for specific pieces of information required that:

1) the state must be one of the 50 states
2) the zip code must be a 5-digit number
3) the birthday must include a month or a number from 1 to 12.

There was a liberal acceptance of "funny" responses such as height--2 feet; weight--400 pounds; hair--green.

Not acceptable: Error or omission in any blank of the application.

Adults were not tested on writing in a scholastic environment. Considering the large numbers, especially in this 25-36 age group, who are continuing their education, we might ask, "Why not?"

READING AND WRITING HABITS OF ADULTS

In the section on Appreciating the Value of Writing the following information was elicited about the things adults typically read and write.

Asked what they ordinarily read during the week, 97% stated they read at least one of the following: 60% read books, 46%, business letters; 65%, directions or instructions; 78%, magazines; 95%, newspapers; 65%, personal letters; 49%, recipes; and 8%, some other type of reading matter. Only 3% did not indicate reading any of them.

Asked if they had left a written message for someone during the past 12 months, 79% said "yes" and 21% said "no."

Of 73% of the adults who said they had made a trip away from home during the past 12 months, 71% indicated they had performed one or more writing activities: 28% said they had written a postcard; 27% said they had written a letter after they got home telling about a trip; 15% said they had written a letter while on a trip; 6% said they had kept a diary; 14% said they had made notes about a trip; 27% said they had written a thank-you to someone they visited; and 8% said they had written a report about a trip after they got home. Of the adults who said they had taken a trip, 29% indicated they had written none of these things.

Fifty-five percent said they had written a letter to order something through the mail during the past 12 months.

NAEP REPORTS

For general information about the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) address: Information Office, NAEP, 300 Lincoln Tower, 1860 Lincoln Street, Denver, Colorado 80203.

The following NAEP reports are particularly relevant to the basic education of adults and out-of-school youth. See the note on how to order them from the Government Printing Office (GPO) or from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS) at the end of the list.

National Assessment of Educational Progress. WRITING: NATIONAL RESULTS. Nov. 1970. 166p. GPO #832739, $1.50. Microfiche also available from EDRS, ED 051 245, $0.65.

This is the report from which most of the data on adult writing have been extracted in this digest. It contains also similar data for the 9, 13, and 17 year old groups.

WRITING: NATIONAL RESULTS–WRITING MECHANICS. Feb. 1972, 150p. Will be available from GPO in near future.

Detailed analysis of the problems of spelling, sentence structure, capitalization, etc. for each of the four age levels.

SCIENCE: NATIONAL RESULTS AND ILLUSTRATIONS OF GROUP COMPARISONS. July, 1970, 214p. Available from GPO, $1.75. Also available from EDRS: ED 055 786, microfiche $0.65; hard copy $9.87.

CITIZENSHIP: NATIONAL RESULTS. Nov., 1970, 125p. Available from GPO, $1.75.

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